

EMS Shortages

The state's emergency medical system is in a workforce crisis and EMS services in many communities are very troubled, and in some cases, near collapse.

EMS is the safety net for emergency care for many of our state's citizens, yet this very important public health resource is primarily provided by volunteers in all but our most urban areas. Over the last couple of years, our office has convened an EMS System task force to comprehensively review EMS issues, we've conducted numerous town meetings in many of these small communities and we're currently conducting a statewide survey of EMTs and EMS services to identify issues and problems. In all venues, recruitment and retention of our volunteers comes to the top of the list.

The reasons for this shortage are as varied as the communities we serve. Nonetheless, a few themes are emerging that necessitate strategies and solutions:

- 1) Volunteers commit significant amounts of time and money (many times out of their own pockets) to train and become licensed. This commitment continues as they maintain their skills. With such an important public health service as EMS, we should do everything possible to lesson the time and cost to EMS volunteers to become trained and to maintain their education. As such, we need to utilize alternative and distance learning training methods, educational stipends or scholarships, and strategies which bring more education to local volunteers who have limited time or money to attend training away from their communities.
- 2) To help retain volunteers, we need to consider 'value added' incentives such as a retirement program (as volunteer firemen have) and/or tax breaks which reward our EMTs for their service. As mentioned yesterday, "How much should it cost to be a volunteer". Strategies such as these may lesson the financial hardships that are plaguing some of our volunteers. In many cases, small thank you's such as this will help retain our small pool of volunteers for longer periods.
- 3) We need to develop a better support system for local EMS systems. We need to help each EMS service assess their challenges and needs and to develop a strategic plan. While funding will help some of their challenges, most also need better trained leaders and instructors, support for medical directors to provide medical oversight and assistance with quality improvement activities.
- 4) We need to engage our local governments and the public more in supporting EMS systems. Many people are not aware of how much their local EMS services are at risk. EMS is an essential public health service and our communities need to become more involved in supporting them. Conversely, many services have been too stressed and busy to reach out to the community and we need to assist them in these efforts.

I was trained as an EMT over 30 years ago and volunteered for many years in a small community in northeastern Montana. I still hold fond memories of volunteering my services and have an intense desire to help those who still volunteer. There is a critical need to support these volunteers who have a passionate desire to help their friends, family and others who are suffering illness and injury. I look forward to working with you and others to develop strategies to lesson the workforce struggles they are going through.

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